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PROGRAM Take Two

STATION CNN-TV

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SUBJECT The CIA

CHRIS CURLE: And now we want to look again at the Central Intelligence Agency. That's the CIA, the country's most secret agency. The CIA has been thrust into the limelight from time to time because of controversy over its covert actions in other countries. Recently, the mining of Nicaragua's harbor sparked a call for a closer watch on the CIA.

CNN's Gene Randall continues his look at the role of the CIA.

GENE RANDALL: Embattled CIA Director William Casey has been put on notice. An apology on Capitol Hill won't be enough. He'll have to treat congressional oversight a lot more seriously.

SENATOR DAVID DURENBERGER: I think Bill Casey is in a position where he's got -- now has to deliver.

RANDALL: Senator David Durenberger, a member of President Reagan's own party, a sharp critic of American covert action in Central America.

Stansfield Turner, who headed the Central Intelligence Agency for Jimmy Carter. He warns that congressional unhappiness with the CIA will have its price.

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: What's going to happen, I'm afraid, is that if the Congress no longer trusts the CIA, they're going to pass laws that will require excessive flow of information to the Congress, thereby jeopardizing the whole intelligence process.

RANDALL: Formal congressional oversight of the CIA grew

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out of the investigations of the mid-Seventies, the most notable led by the late Senator Frank Church. Those investigations painted a picture of a CIA involved in illegal surveillance in the United States and in highly questionable activities abroad.

Former CIA Director William Colby acknowledges there is a need to keep an eye on the agency, that congressional oversight is the way.

WILLIAM COLBY: The benefits that it gives, I think, is that if something happens abroad and it turns out not to have been the wisest of actions -- and sometimes intelligence operations are high-risk and sometimes they fail -- then the question is not whether CIA was some rogue elephant, which it never has been, but rather that we Americans made a mistake, through our constitutional system.

RANDALL: The CIA mining of the Nicaraguan harbors of Corinto, Porto Sandino and El Bluf (?), and the earlier raid on the oil storage tanks at Corinto showed oversight is far from perfect, not nearly as smooth a process as the handling of the recommendation for the covert action itself, from the National Security Council's senior inter-agency group to the President. His signature authorizes the operation.

Author and intelligence community analyst David Wise:

DAVID WISE: Oversight has not worked sufficiently to please, I think, anyone watching the process. And the mining of the harbors of Nicaragua was not an aberration. It was an example of why it hasn't worked. And I think it has to be tightened up.

RANDALL: Congressman Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma, a member of the House Intelligence Committee. His complaint: that oversight is most often after the fact.

REP. DAVE MCCURDY: The operations are many times begun by the presidential directive, and then we are later informed. The only true key that we have to any of this or any hammer, if you will, is the appropriations process.

RANDALL: On the scope of U.S. covert action in Central America:

REP. MCCURDY: A lot of people are now trying to put blame on us or make us share the blame. But that's not the case. We've stated it clearly along the way, tried to stop it every way that we had feasible, and it still is continuing.

RANDALL: Describing its own role, the CIA claims it walks a new and fine line between an openness in government

Americans have come to expect and the secrecy that intelligence, by its very nature, demands. Indeed, say its critics, the nature of the CIA is the nature of the oversight problem.

WISE: It's just a different animal. And because it's covert and secret to begin with, and you've got people who spend their lifetime and they're highly skilled at deception, one of the groups they're going to deceive from time to time will be the Congress.

RANDALL: The Senate Intelligence Committee is rewriting its procedures. The attempt to make oversight work better.

SENATOR DURENBERGER: We're putting in writing certain obligations on the part of the agency to report to us when certain decisions are taken by the President or by the National Security Council or by the National Security Policy Group, which are the key decision-making agencies, either -- and most of those would be changes in the way a particular operation [unintelligible] would be conducted.

RANDALL: There are those who say the image of the Central Intelligence Agency now is as bad as it's been at any time since the investigations of the mid-Seventies, that the glare of publicity not only erodes the agency's credibility, but also interferes with the CIA's major function: gathering and analyzing foreign intelligence.

Still, the fact is the controversy about the CIA's covert operations under the Reagan Administration does not approach the level of condemnation of CIA practices revealed by the Church Committee and others.

There is another point. Until those investigations in the Seventies, very few Americans paid much attention to the CIA. That is not true today. The Congress, the media, and the public are all very much aware of the CIA's role. And that, in itself, can act as a kind of restraint on what the CIA does.

Gene Randall, CNN, outside CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia.